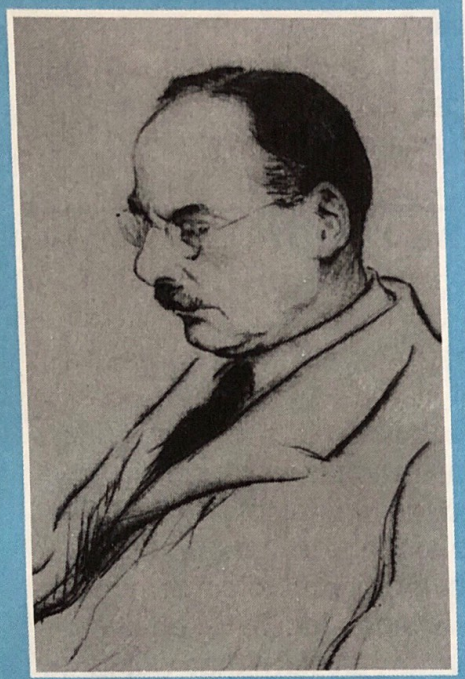
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

1869–1935



Edwin Arlington Robinson's poetry bridged the gap between two literary eras. Like most nineteenth-century poetry, his work was traditional in form. Yet like the work of modern poets, his poetry was innovative in content, probing beneath the surface of human behavior and exploring the psychological realities of the inner self.

Robinson was raised in Gardiner, Maine, a small town that served as the model for Tilbury Town, the fictional setting of many of his finest poems. When his father, a successful lumber merchant, died, Robinson's family suddenly found itself living in poverty. Robinson attended Harvard for two years before his family's financial problems forced him to leave. He returned to Gardiner and began writing poetry, depending on friends and patrons for financial support. During his four years in Gardiner, Robinson drew back inside himself. He took little interest in the world outside and, instead, read voluminously. He missed the friendships he had made at Harvard and sensed that he was seen as a failure. Despite the despair Robinson experienced during these years, he came through them with a sense of himself as a poet who could speak the truth.

Just before the turn of the century, Robinson published two unsuccessful collections of poetry, *The Torrent and the Night Before* (1896) and *Children of the Night* (1897), at his own expense. Hoping to improve his financial situation, he moved to New York. As it turned out, his situation did improve when President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him to a post at a New York customshouse. Robinson also discovered success as a poet when his fourth volume of poetry, *The Town Down the River* (1910), sold well and received much critical acclaim.

Robinson went on to become a highly regarded poet. His collections *The Man Against the Sky* (1916), *Avon's Harvest* (1922), and *Collected Poems* (1921) were very successful, as was his trilogy of long narrative poems based on the legends of King Arthur: *Merlin, Lancelot,* and *Tristram*. During the 1920's Robinson received more recognition than any other American poet, winning the Pulitzer Prize three times, in 1922, 1925, and 1928.

Growing out of his childhood observations in Gardiner, most of Robinson's best poems focus on people's inner struggles. His poems paint portraits of impoverished characters whose lives are filled with frustration and despair, characters who see their lives as trivial and meaningless, and characters who long to live in another time and place. Yet despite their pessimistic outlook, his poems always possess a certain dignity, resulting from his traditional style, his command of language, and his imagination and wit.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

Luke Havergal; Miniver Cheevy; Richard Cory

Writers' Techniques

Irony. Irony is a contrast between what is stated and what is meant, or between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. Three types of irony used in literature are verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony. Verbal irony occurs when the literal meaning of a word or statement is different from the intended meaning. Situational irony occurs when the actual result of an action or a situation is different from the expected result. Dramatic irony occurs when the audience perceives something that a character in a literary work does not know.

Irony is an important element in many of Edwin Arlington Robinson's poems. Robinson possessed an intense awareness of the ironies of everyday life—the contrasts between reality and people's perceptions, between results and expectations, and between the way people view themselves and how they are seen by others—and he sought to capture these ironies in his harshly realistic poetry.

Focus

People are always in search of happiness, but what is happiness? William Saroyan once wrote, "The greatest happiness you can have is knowing that you do not necessarily require happiness." Freewrite, exploring the meaning of this quotation.

Primary Source

In describing Edwin Arlington Robinson's work, poet James Dickey has written:

> It is through people that Robinson found the hints and gleams of the universal condition that he could not help trying to solve. . . . Robinson has been perhaps the only American poet—certainly the only one of major status—interested *exclusively* in human beings as subject matter for poetry—in the psychological, motivational aspects of living, in the inner life as it is projected upon the outer. His work is one vast attempt to tell the stories that no man can really tell, for no man can know their real meaning, their real intention, or even whether such exists. . . . In all Robinson's people the Cosmos seems to be brooding in one way or another. . . .
>
> No poet ever understood loneliness or separateness better than Robinson or knew the self-consuming furnace that the brain can become in isolation. . . . He understood loneliness in all its many forms and depths. . . .

Luke Havergal

Edwin Arlington Robinson

Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There where the vines cling crimson on the wall,
And in the twilight wait for what will come.
The leaves will whisper there of her, and some,
Like flying words, will strike you as they fall;
But go, and if you listen she will call.
Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies
To rift the fiery night that's in your eyes;
But there, where western glooms are gathering,
The dark will end the dark, if anything:
God slays Himself with every leaf that flies,
And hell is more than half of paradise.
No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies—
In eastern skies.

THE ARTIST'S GARDEN, c. 1880
Ralph Albert Blakelock
National Gallery of Art

Out of a grave I come to tell you this,
Out of a grave I come to quench the kiss
That flames upon your forehead with a glow
That blinds you to the way that you must go.
Yes, there is yet one way to where she is,
Bitter, but one that faith may never miss.
Out of a grave I come to tell you this—
To tell you this.

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There are the crimson leaves upon the wall.
Go, for the winds are tearing them away,—
Nor think to riddle the dead words they say,
Nor any more to feel them as they fall;
But go, and if you trust her she will call.
There is the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What did you hear as you read this poem? What did you see?
2. How does this poem make you feel?

Recalling

3. Why should Luke Havergal go to the western gate?
4. From where has the speaker come to deliver his message?

Interpreting

5. What do you think was Luke's relationship to the woman referred to in the poem?
6. (a) Considering that the sun sets in the west and considering the details used in describing the western gate, what do you think the western gate symbolizes? (b) What does the "dawn in eastern skies" symbolize?
7. The speaker may actually be part of Luke Havergal's inner self. If this is so, what does the poem reveal about Luke Havergal's state of mind?
8. Considering Luke's state of mind and the action he is being urged to take, what do you think the speaker means when he comments, "The dark will end the dark"?
9. Robinson's use of repetition in the poem creates a hypnotic effect. How is this effect related to the meaning of the poem?

Applying

10. This poem suggests that a person can never replace a loved one whom he or she has lost. Discuss this view.

Learning Option

Writing. Who exactly is Luke Havergal? What is the tragedy of his life? Fill in the missing details. Write a biographical sketch of the Tilbury Town resident who is the subject of Robinson's poem. In your sketch you might recount the central events of Havergal's life and present your interpretation of the events.

Miniver Cheevy

Edwin Arlington Robinson

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
    Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
He wept that he was ever born,
    And he had reasons.

Miniver loved the days of old
    When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
    Would set him dancing.

Miniver sighed for what was not,
    And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes[1] and Camelot,[2]
    And Priam's[3] neighbors.

Miniver mourned the ripe renown
    That made so many a name so fragrant;
He mourned Romance, now on the town,[4]
    And Art, a vagrant.

Miniver loved the Medici,[5]
    Albeit he had never seen one;
He would have sinned incessantly
    Could he have been one.

Miniver cursed the commonplace
    And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;
He missed the medieval grace
    Of iron clothing.

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
    But sore annoyed was he without it;
Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,
    And thought about it.

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1. Thebes (thēbz): A city-state in ancient Greece.
2. Camelot (kam′ ə lät′): The legendary English town where King Arthur's court and Round Table were located.
3. Priam (prī′ əm): King of Troy during the Trojan War.
4. on the town: On public assistance.
5. Medici (med′ ə chē): A rich, powerful family of Florence, Italy, in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.

Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
Scratched his head and kept on thinking;
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
And kept on drinking.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What is your opinion of Miniver Cheevy? Do you sympathize with him or "scorn" him? Explain.
2. What advice would you give Cheevy if he were a friend of yours?

Recalling

3. What is Miniver Cheevy's basic problem?
4. What does the final line reveal about how Miniver Cheevy copes with his unhappiness?

Interpreting

5. The word *miniver* refers to a white fur used for trimming ceremonial robes during the Middle Ages. Why is this an appropriate name for the character in the poem?
6. How does the speaker suggest that Cheevy does not have a realistic image of the past?
7. Why do you think Cheevy "scorned the gold he sought"?

Applying

8. Like Miniver Cheevy, people often try to escape from their problems, rather than confronting them and trying to find a solution. Why is this an ineffective way of dealing with problems?

Analyzing Literature

Understanding Irony

Irony is a contrast between what is stated and what is meant, or between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. Three types of irony used in literature are verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony.

1. In line 2 the speaker comments that Cheevy "assailed the seasons." (a) How is this image related to Cheevy's visions of the past? (b) Why is this image ironic considering Cheevy's life?
2. What is ironic about Cheevy missing "the medieval grace" of iron clothing?
3. Explain how the use of irony affects your attitude toward Cheevy.

Learning Options

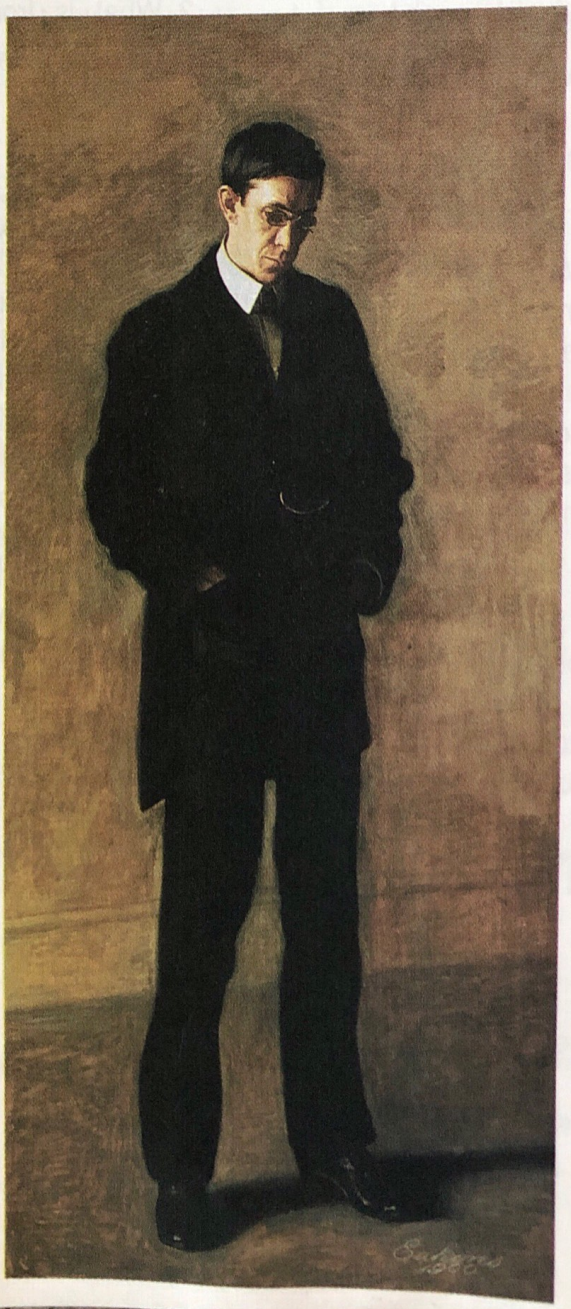
1. **Writing.** Help Miniver Cheevy fulfill his dreams. Transport the failed romantic to ancient Thebes, Camelot, or Troy. How does he fare in the world of Hercules, King Arthur, or King Priam? Add a stanza or two to Robinson's poem to describe Cheevy's experiences.
2. **Art.** Imagine that you have been commissioned by the publisher to illustrate a collection of Edwin Arlington Robinson's Tilbury Town poems. How would you illustrate "Miniver Cheevy"? Capture Cheevy's personality in a picture. You might find a painting, draw a portrait, or write detailed directions for an artist. Share your picture or your description with classmates.

Richard Cory

Edwin Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.



THE THINKER
(Portrait of Louis N. Kenton, 1900)
Thomas Eakins
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What was your reaction to the last two lines of the poem?
2. Would you like to read Edwin Arlington Robinson's poems about other residents of Tilbury Town? Why or why not?

Recalling

3. Why was Richard Cory envied by the townspeople?
4. What does Richard Cory do "one calm summer night"?

Interpreting

5. (a) Who is the speaker of the poem? (b) In what ways is the speaker different from Richard Cory?
6. What do the words "crown" (line 3) and "imperially" (line 4) suggest about the speaker's impression of Richard Cory?
7. Why would the poem be less forceful if the speaker had used the pronoun "I" instead of "we"? Explain your answer.
8. What makes the poem's final line surprising?
9. What do you think is the theme of the poem?

Applying

10. (a) Why do you think a person like Richard Cory, who seemingly has every reason to be happy, might in fact be miserable? (b) What do you think are the keys to a person's happiness?
11. The French writer Colette wrote, "What a wonderful life I've had! I only wish I'd realized it sooner." Discuss the meaning of this quotation.

Critical Thinking and Reading

Recognizing Attitudes

This poem points out that each person has a different outlook on life and that it is often difficult for people to perceive or understand the outlooks of others. In the poem we are presented with the speaker's view of Richard Cory, which leads us to expect Cory to be happy. As a result, we are shocked by the ending of the poem and forced to realize that the speaker's impressions were false. The ending also forces us to contemplate Cory's perceptions of himself and the speaker and to think about how they are different from the speaker's perceptions.

1. Considering the outcome of the poem, how do you think Cory's attitude toward himself differs from the speaker's attitude toward him?
2. What do you think might have been Richard Cory's attitude toward the townspeople?

Learning Option

Writing. Richard Cory is the mystery man, Miniver Cheevy, the failed romantic, and Luke Havergal, the star-crossed lover. Who else might have lived in Tilbury Town? Together with classmates, write poems about characters who could have lived in Tilbury Town. Try to assign each character a name that provides insight into his or her character.